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Webster expected to take CIA reins with quiet efficiency

By Bill Gertz
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The CIA, subject to unusual public scrutiny and with a new leader, is not expected to undergo radical changes under William H. Webster, according to present and former intelligence officials.

Several intelligence officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Mr. Webster, a former federal judge who ran the FBI for the past nine years, plans to approach his new job with an impartial "judicial" perspective that they welcome.

Mr. Webster was confirmed as CIA director by the Senate Tuesday, by a 94-1 vote.

One senior FBI official said Mr. Webster will be "coming over light" to the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va. The new director is expected to bring a small staff that includes FBI Special Assistant John B. Hotis, FBI Assistant Director for Public Affairs William Baker, two law clerks and his longtime FBI secretary, the official said.

"He will be depending a lot on the people already over there, especially [CIA deputy director] Bob Gates," the official said. "He doesn't have any strong feelings on the way the agency should be run."

The official said Mr. Webster plans to operate at the CIA in much the same way he approached the FBI in 1978, when the bureau was faced with public and congressional pressure over alleged improper domestic intelligence activities.

"He plans to take a studied look, to be briefed and briefed and briefed again," said the official. "And then he'll make some deliberate moves. But he's not going in with any fixed agenda."

The official said Mr. Webster, who is referred to at the FBI as "the Judge," does not plan to restrict CIA activities, but expects to "keep people accountable" to the often complex executive guidelines and congressional regulations imposed on the agency.

As FBI director, Mr. Webster has been praised by most intelligence officials for his role in building up the FBI's counterespionage cap-

abilities.

Sen. Chic Hecht, Nevada Republican and member of the Intelligence Committee, said in an interview that Mr. Webster's record as FBI chief and his good relations with congressional oversight panels are his best asset and will serve him well as CIA director.

"He has in place a tremendous operations staff over there," Mr. Hecht said. "That will be his true test: if he allows the staff in place to continue carrying on what [former CIA director] Bill Casey built up."

Mr. Casey, who died of cancer this month after resigning May 6, directed a major buildup of the agency's operations capabilities involving "a top group of dedicated and professional young people" posted at CIA stations around the world, Mr. Hecht said.

Witnesses in the Iran-Contra investigation in Congress have closely linked Mr. Casey and a Central American CIA operative to the case, but so far broad agency involvement in the operation has not been uncovered.

One administration official, speaking on condition he not be identified, said morale in most parts of the agency remains high despite the continuing investigations.

The official said Mr. Webster is expected to learn his new job quickly since he has more experience in intelligence than past directors brought in from outside the agency.

However, the Iran-Contra inquiry has affected the morale of some field agents in Central America who feel that "there are more investigators than case officers," he said.

Officials said Mr. Webster's presence at CIA will help to ensure that legal restrictions on agency operations will be strictly enforced.

The Senate Intelligence Committee recently informed the CIA and the National Security Council that the committee plans to conduct spot checks of financial records to ensure that operations conformed to legal guidelines.

Another reform recently put in place by National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci, according to offi-

cials, was to set up a covert action review board, similar to a CIA review board, that will periodically review all such programs.

However, one official said that, contrary to some reports describing a one-third cutback in covert action programs, there has been no reduction as a result of the Iran-Contra affair.

Some reports have suggested that Mr. Webster's friendship with former CIA Director Stansfield Turner may signal major policy changes at the agency.

Adm. Turner, CIA director during the Carter administration, brought in a large number of Navy officials to assist him and he dismissed or transferred many of the agency's most experienced operatives.

The official pointed out that while Mr. Webster knows Adm. Turner from their days at Amherst College, Mr. Webster also is close to former CIA Director Richard Helms, an agency stalwart well respected by hard-liners.

One senior CIA operations official, who retired in the late 1970s, described Mr. Webster as independent-minded official who "goes by the book" and thus may have a "tempering affect" on agency covert operations.

"I don't think he'll abandon it as a tool, but he may just wait until he's more comfortable with it," the official said.

He said Mr. Webster could have the greatest impact on developing CIA counterintelligence, which has rebounded in recent years from a decline that began in the late 1970s.

David Atlee Phillips, former CIA Latin America operations chief, said some agency operatives have taken a "wait and see" approach to Mr. Webster because of his lack of experience.

"There's a big difference between handling a really clandestine type of operation as opposed to a partially clandestine type of operation that the FBI is used to running," he said. "People in the operations directorate are wondering if he'll be able to do that."